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A Thousand Days

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BOOK OF THE WEEK

Schlesinger on Kennedy: A Rich and Glowing Portrait

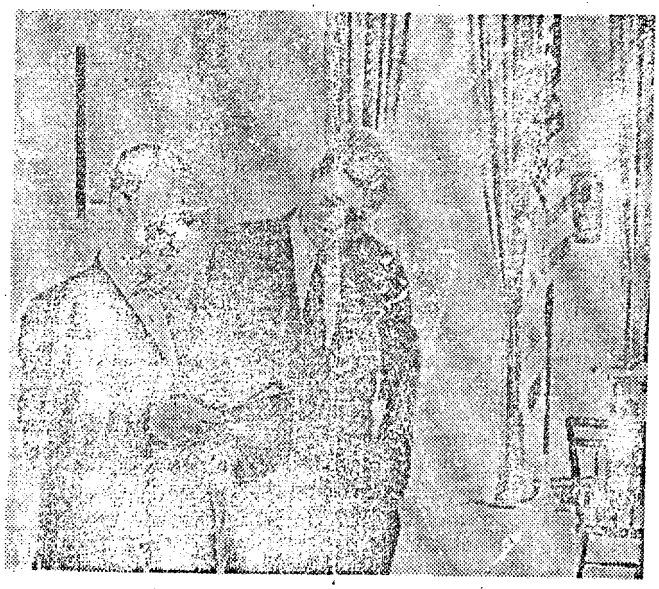
A THOUSAND DAYS: John F. Kennedy in the White House, by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (Houghton Mifflin, $9).

By Allan Nevins

THIS IS A BOOK of historical depth as well as reportorial range and liveliness. President Kennedy was fortunate in having at his side two young men who could immediately produce works on his administration as distinguished as Theodore C. Sorensen's "Kennedy" and Mr. Schlesinger's "A Thousand Days." He was still more fortunate in that they could write volumes largely different in content, ideas, and spirit, affording a binocular rather than monocular vision of the man. The commonplace judgment is that Sorensen offers the journalist's approach, Schlesinger the historian's. Actually Sorensen may better be termed the practical politician, and Schlesinger the academic expert. It is creditable to John F. Kennedy that he made good use of two such divergent talents, and the records they write complement each other with little duplication.

Mr. Schlesinger can be subtle and discriminating, but his approach includes a full use of autobiographical material, and these pages from a well-filled notebook glow with the same narrative verve as his volumes on Jackson and Franklin D. Roosevelt. He presents a superb psychological analysis of Kennedy and "the Kennedy style" and an incisive study of the spirit of the New Frontier. But he pauses also to limn with gusto the events of Inauguration Day; the first working days in the White House office, when Kennedy forgot and referred to himself as Senator; such early events as the call from Truman—"a gay talk, the old and the new President, and the young wife;" the first executive orders and first problems to tackle. He takes time to describe his trip to Latin America for the President, his admiration for Betancourt, and his study of the Cuban chaos out of which Castro emerged.

SO HIS NARRATIVE CONTINUES to the end—to the day in 1963 when, talking with Adlai E. Stevenson, he heard the ambassador say that he had found "something very ugly and frightening about the atmosphere" in Dallas, and that "some of the leading people wonder whether the President should go there, and so do I." Mr. Schlesinger is very much the objective historian when he deals with foreign aid, with finance as managed by Dillon, with the emergence of the bloody head of the Viet Nam problem from the Asian welter, and with Berlin. But he had eyes and ears so open, and so many points of contact with intellectual observers everywhere, that he keeps his story filled with personal touches. They range from his observation of Harvard circles as Kennedy levied on Cambridge for staff, and his notes on American businessmen making Havana a huge casino and brothel, to his impressions of the transforming touch that Jacqueline Kennedy placed upon the White House, and his hour-by-hour comment on State Department, White House, and United Nations activities during the "confrontation" of Khrushchev in the missile crisis.



Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (left) and President Kennedy

IT IS A RICH BOOK. It covers everything from the Birch Society and the race problem to the character of the President's religion—he was the first Roman Catholic in the Presidency but not a Roman Catholic President. It covers, very particularly, the revolution in Africa, and Kennedy's preoccupation with such socio-economic problems as health, highways, housing, community planning, and, and, above all, education. Yet despite the wealth of Mr. Schlesinger's personal observation, Kennedy is almost always in the center of the screen. The author makes it plain that he had an attitude all his own toward the Presidency, compounded of exhilarating love of action, conscientious devotion to duty, a clear realization that life and society are too complex for moralistic black-and-white judgments, and a remarkable talent for combining ironic wit with singleminded concentration. When the Bay of Pigs affair exploded in his face, he felt the burden of his responsibilities keenly. He blamed himself more than the CIA or the Pentagon. But normally he had a Rooseveltian joy of life.

As Mr. Schlesinger remarks, his Presidential life was instinct with [illegible] everything around here today," wrote James Reston, "but shinny up the Washington Monument." Watching a small child

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